

Establishing Instructional Congruence Across Learning Settings: One Path to Success for Struggling Third-Grade Readers

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When the third-grade teachers at South Elementary School agreed to let their struggling readers go “down the hall” with the reading specialist during their scheduled reading block, they did so with a great amount of trepidation. They knew that their most vulnerable students would participate in the reading specialist’s intervention—and they trusted her—but it left them with many questions: What would the students be missing while they were out of the classroom? How would the students feel when they got back to the classroom? What happened to our school’s full inclusion model?

Three months into the intervention program, the third-grade teachers not only began to make comments on the noticeable progress their students were making, but they began to ask a very different question: “What do you do down there, anyway?” This is the story of what we did and our (intended and unintended) results.

During recent years, substantial attention has been directed toward intervention programs for children who struggle to learn to read in the first and second grades. Several approaches to early intervention have met with positive results (e.g., Foorman, Francis, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1997; Hiebert, 1983; Pinnell, 1985; Santa & Hoen, 1999; Taylor, Strait, & Medo, 1994) indicating that when difficulty in learning to read is addressed early and intensively, widespread failure can be prevented for many children. However, despite the success of these early intervention efforts, there is evidence that a considerable number of children continue to experience difficulty in

reading beyond second grade. For example, at the national level in the United States, results from the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2001) indicate that only 63% of fourth-grade students achieved at or above the basic level of achievement. At the state level, as well, large-scale testing typically indicates that large numbers of children are achieving below grade level in reading.

In the state of Massachusetts, where the work presented in this chapter was implemented, a report issued by the Massachusetts Department of Education (2000) indicated that at the fourth-grade level, 13% of all students who took the state assessment the previous spring achieved failing grades in English language arts. Disaggregation of results underscored the unevenness of achievement for particular types of learners: 7% of regular education learners, 39% of students with identified special learning needs, and 43% of students acquiring English as a second language made failing scores. These results do not include the students who did not take the test at all, which included approximately 13% of the children identified with special education needs and more than 40% of the children identified as English language learners.

The consequences of not learning to read at a level commensurate with one's peers are substantial. As described by Stanovich (2000), differences in reading ability enable differential support of further vocabulary, knowledge, and cognitive structures outside school. These bootstrapped knowledge bases then create further individual differences that are made manifest in differential performance as children grapple with subsequent in-school content and skills.

The negative consequences of failure in reading may extend well beyond the areas of an individual child's cognition and intellect. In recent years, both federal and state policymakers raised the stakes for schools and children even higher by tying evidence of grade-level achievement to funding for institutions and promotion and graduation for individuals. At the national level, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (see U.S. Department of Education, 2002) includes a stipulation that federal funding be reduced in states that fail to demonstrate results in academic achievement. At the state level, consequences vary widely from state to state and district to district. In Massachusetts, individual children often face grade retention in the early grades, and in the later grades, beginning in 2003, failure to achieve the standard on the state's comprehensive assessment will prohibit the awarding of a high school

diploma. In school districts in which high percentages of children test below grade level, takeover by state educational officials has been threatened as a possible sanction.

It was in this climate that this chapter's study evolved. At the time that we planned and implemented the study, one of the authors, Rachel McCormack, was one of two reading specialists in a local school. Along with her colleague, she was charged with the responsibility to help classroom teachers bring every child to grade-level performance in reading. Although previous efforts at reading intervention in first and second grades had been judged to be relatively successful, a locally developed literacy performance assessment administered at the beginning of grade 3 indicated that several children continued to struggle in reading. As we began to plan an instructional program for these children, we confronted two apparently conflicting research findings. Juel (1988, 1990) reported that children do best when they are taught with materials at their instructional levels (that is, 90% or better accuracy in word identification) and most poorly when materials are at their frustration level (below 90% accuracy in word identification). This finding has led many teachers to continue the traditional practice of differentiating children's reading instruction by changing the text in which they read.

Although differentiation allows children to read words in the text with relative ease, there is evidence that suggests it may have an unexpected consequence: Easier texts may bar access to concepts and ideas otherwise acquired by reading grade-appropriate texts. As a result, when such texts represent the only or even the primary material read by students routinely in classrooms, these children may develop what Fielding and Roller (1992) refer to as "knowledge handicaps" (p. 680). That is, the lack of exposure to grade-level concepts, vocabulary, and syntax may prevent children from acquiring information that contributes to their development of language, comprehension, and writing.

We sought an instructional intervention that would allow us to reconcile these apparently conflicting findings, one that would provide children access to grade-appropriate language, ideas, and concepts and, at the same time, help them to improve their ability to read unknown words and, therefore, to advance toward independence in reading. We drew from evidence that children would need explicit, systematic, and intensive instruction in word-study strategies (Adams, 1990, 1998; Ehri, 1997; Torgesen, Wagner, & Roshotte, 1997). We also drew from evidence that instructional strategies such as preteaching of vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 1991), discussion of background knowledge

(Pearson & Fielding, 1991), and repeated readings (Dowhower, 1987; O'Shea, Sindelar, & O'Shea, 1985; Rasinski, 1990; Samuels, 1979; Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990) would allow children to read and reread text that might otherwise prove too difficult, and we considered the importance of explicit instruction in reading comprehension for readers of all levels of achievement (Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, & Nguyen, 1997; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 1997; Raphael, 1997).

As we clarified the intervention plan, we also refined our research focus, and we ended up with a single question to investigate: When children enter third grade reading substantially below grade level, what are the effects of grouping children homogeneously for part of their literacy instruction and providing instruction using grade-level text in combination with explicit, systematic, and intensive instruction in both word and comprehension strategies? In the sections that follow, we describe the context in which we implemented our work, the procedures we followed, and the results we achieved.

The Context

South Elementary School is a suburban school of approximately 650 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Most of the children are of European American descent, and most of the families are of middle-class socioeconomic status. Rachel had been a classroom teacher at South Elementary for more than 20 years and, during the year of the study, was one of two reading specialists in the school.

Identifying Children in Need of Extra Help

At the beginning of the school year, the second- and third-grade teachers, reading specialists, and special education teachers worked cooperatively to identify children who were likely to benefit from additional help in reading. To do so, they relied on three primary sources of evidence: (1) a locally developed reading performance assessment, administered by the reading specialists to all third graders at the beginning of the school year; (2) the California Achievement Test (CAT-5), administered to all children in the school district at the end of grade 2; and (3) second- and third-grade teachers' observations and impressions of the children.

The reading performance assessment was designed by the reading specialists and administered individually to all 108 third graders during the first three weeks of the school year. The assessment included two measures: an oral reading of a 255-word fable selected from the district-adopted published anthology for third grade, and an oral retelling immediately thereafter. The oral reading was recorded and evaluated using the running record procedures outlined by Clay (1993). The retelling was recorded and analyzed using the standards established by Morrow (1983). Reading specialists also kept anecdotal records detailing any additional observations they had of the children's reading behaviors.

During the three-week period in which the individual assessments were taking place, classroom teachers recorded their own observations about their students' classroom reading behaviors. When they had questions and concerns about particular students, they consulted with a student's second-grade teacher to inquire about the previous year's experiences and progress in reading. In addition, they collected and examined the results of the CAT-5, administered at the end of second grade, for more information about children's reading behaviors.

At the end of the third week of school, with all tests administered and all information gathered on each child, the classroom teachers and the reading specialists met. As some of the children had been previously identified as having special learning needs, the special education teachers also participated in the review meeting. The team sought to identify children who would be likely to benefit from a special intervention in reading, based on the following criteria: they scored in the bottom quartile on the CAT-5; classroom observations during either second or third grade indicated that they were having difficulty reading grade-level texts in either reading or content areas; and, on the Reading Performance Assessment, they achieved a score below 90% on the running record and a score of 3 or less on the oral retelling. Based on a review and discussion of the evidence, the team identified 12 general education and 6 special education students they believed would benefit from extra help in reading.

Planning and Implementing the Intervention

The intervention plan was based on a flexible-grouping model (Paratore, 1991, 2000) developed initially for use with children in general education

classrooms. In the original iteration of the model, all students have access to the same grade-appropriate text, and the teacher is expected to differentiate instruction by forming small, needs-based groups in which children are provided with instruction and practice in the particular skills and strategies they need to successfully read and respond to the text.

During our visits to classrooms, we had observed that in many cases when teachers implemented the model as it was originally designed, they did not always effectively differentiate instruction for children who were experiencing substantial difficulty in reading. Often, teachers were observed engaged in whole-class instruction for long periods of time, and even in classrooms where teachers formed small needs-based groups, we observed that teaching methods often did not include the types or intensity of decoding or comprehension instruction that could be expected to advance the lowest performing students toward greater independence in reading. As a result, some children received insufficient support and often failed to make appreciable gains, perhaps not because they lacked the ability to make progress, but rather because they lacked appropriate and effective instruction. In many instances, they seemed to spend more time listening and responding to text than actually reading it.

In planning the intervention for the 18 identified children, we held onto the basic tenets of the original grouping model—that access to grade-appropriate text was important for the development of vocabulary and concepts that influenced both comprehension and composition and also was important if all children were to have full access to the classroom literacy community. However, we deviated from the initial model by choosing to deliver instruction outside the classroom within a group of relatively homogeneous students. As the content of the instruction was largely similar to that which was occurring in the classroom, we called the group a “pull-aside” rather than a “pull-out” group. In the “pull-aside” model, the children would read the same text as their higher performing classroom peers; however, their instruction would be “beefed up” with more systematic and intensive instruction in word-study strategies, increased opportunities for repeated readings to build fluency, and more explicit and systematic instruction in comprehension monitoring strategies.

In order to carry out our plan, we needed the cooperation of the third-grade teachers and the special educators. This meant careful planning and a great deal of compromising. For example, all third-grade teachers had to agree to teach reading using the same literature at the same time, as the students would be pulled from four different

classrooms. They also had to agree to keep the pacing of instruction consistent—and that meant that the reading specialist had to keep a brisk pace. Finally, they had to agree that when the students returned to the classroom each day, they would be reintegrated into ongoing literacy instruction and be full participants in the classroom literacy community. In the case of the special education teachers, they had to agree to permit the reading specialist to take responsibility for teaching reading to children who had been identified as having special learning needs. This was a significant programmatic departure in this school, where up to this point, any child identified as needing special education services received instruction in reading from the special education teacher.

Clearly, this was a daunting proposition for the teachers involved. It meant that classroom teachers would give up some of their autonomy in choosing what their students would read and when they would read it. It also meant that lessons could not be executed on the fly. Strict adherence to the plan was necessary if the programs offered in the two separate settings were to remain cohesive. With this ideal in mind, the intervention began.

Beginning during the first week in October, the students were provided with the intervention in pull-aside instruction four days per week in one of two groups. The groups were formed on the basis of the classroom teachers' preference: two had volunteered to send their students during the first hour and teach reading in the classroom during that time. The other two teachers delayed teaching reading until the second hour of the day, when they would send their students to the group. In each group there was a combination of general education and special education students.

A typical session included the following activities. Before reading, students reviewed and practiced retelling what they had read the previous day. The students' inability to recall and retell information had been a major consideration when selecting them for the group, and so this task received substantial emphasis. Next, the students were introduced to new vocabulary essential to the comprehension of the day's focal selection. Sight words were introduced, practiced, and added to the classroom word wall. Decodable words were introduced and practiced using appropriate word-making strategies and activities (Cunningham, 1995). Following word study, children browsed through the selection and previewed text and illustrations, shared predictions, and posed questions.

Next, the reading specialist read the text aloud while students followed along in their own copies of the book. As she read, the reading

specialist used think-alouds to model comprehension-monitoring strategies such as self-questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. After the read-aloud, the children shared their reactions, returned to and discussed their predictions, and attempted to answer any questions they themselves had posed. Following the discussion, students read the selection with a peer using a variety of oral reading strategies, including echo reading, choral reading, Readers Theatre, and buddy reading.

After peer reading, students reread a selected passage to the reading teacher, individually or in pairs. They ended the reading hour by self-selecting books to read independently or in pairs. When they returned to their classrooms, they rejoined the classroom literacy community. Along with their classroom peers, they recorded their responses to the focal selection in their reading journals, and then all children were given additional time to read self-selected books.

Monitoring Progress

We monitored the children's progress at three different intervals. First, as noted previously, almost every day students reread at least one page of text to the reading specialist; these rereadings were used to determine whether or not instructional strategies were effective in helping the students to read difficult text on their own. Instruction was redirected or refined as necessary based on children's oral reading performances. Second, approximately every three weeks, a running record of each student's oral reading was taken using "transition text"—that is, the same text they were reading, but a chapter or selection not read previously. These assessments were used to determine whether or not children were learning to apply the strategies they were using routinely in familiar text when reading unfamiliar text. Lessons after these assessments were partly devoted to doing a retrospective miscue analysis (Goodman & Marek, 1996) of common errors seen in the assessment. Sentences or excerpts were recorded on an easel, and the teacher and students discussed ways in which the students might self-correct while reading on their own, using strategies to help them decode the unfamiliar words. Third, in January, after approximately 12 weeks in the intervention program, the Reading Performance Assessment was readministered to each of the 12 general education students. The purpose of readministering the assessment at this point was to determine if any of the students had made enough progress to be discharged from the intervention program. As weekly

assessments had indicated that the special education students continued to require substantial support to read grade-level text, they were not included in the readministration of the performance assessment.

Mid-Year Results

The results of the Reading Performance Assessment indicated that after the first 12 weeks of instruction, 6 of the 12 general education students had achieved grade-level norms, all surpassing 90% accuracy in word-reading and all exceeding a score of 7 on the retelling measure. Their classroom teachers also observed improvement in the students' reading performance on classroom tasks. Teachers noted that the students were able to read the science and social studies texts with relative ease and that they displayed more independence in literacy tasks in general. On the basis of this information, these six students were discharged from the intervention group and joined the classroom literacy community full time.

As for the other six students, although each achieved higher scores on the performance assessment, some even achieving at the grade-level benchmark, the children were not perceived by their classroom teachers to be experiencing the same level of success on routine classroom literacy tasks. As a result, the reading specialist and the classroom teachers were not confident that the gains they made would be maintained without continued support, and they decided to keep them in the intervention program.

As the group was now substantially smaller in size, third-grade teachers were asked if they had observed that any children in their classroom reading groups were struggling. All had one or more students whom they believed would benefit from joining the intervention groups, and each of those students was added to one of the two groups. The groups now comprised six original general education students, six new general education students, and six original special education students. Instruction then continued as was described previously.

End-of-Year Results

For the purposes of this study, we analyzed the results of the original group of 12 general education students and the 6 special education students who entered the intervention project in September. Recall

that at the end of second grade, all 12 general education students had scored in the bottom quartile on the CAT-5. The mean percentile ranking achieved by the group was 21.5. At the end of third grade, the school district replaced the CAT-5 with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Although the tests are not directly comparable, they are similar in format and in the types of literacy tasks assessed. In addition, each test represents children in relation to national norms. On the ITBS, one child advanced to the second quartile, nine advanced to the third quartile, and two remained in the bottom quartile. The mean percentile ranking achieved by the group of 12 was 31.5.

On the locally developed Literacy Performance Assessment administered in September, the 12 general education children achieved a word-reading accuracy score of 86% and a comprehension score of 3.7. In June, the word-reading accuracy score increased to 97% and the comprehension score increased to 9.4. In both September and June, children were tested on passages that were grade-appropriate.

In the case of the six children with special learning needs, the changes in literacy performance were dramatic. In the September administration of the Reading Performance Assessment, the children with special learning needs experienced substantial difficulty. No student was able to complete the reading of the fable and, in five cases, it was discontinued after 125 words. One student made no attempt to read it at all, stating, "I stink at reading." When the accuracy score for the 125-word abbreviated passage was calculated, the mean score was 72%. As students read a short passage from the fable, they were not asked to complete the retelling task. The June administration yielded dramatic gains for all six students. Each completed both the oral reading and the retelling. The mean word-reading accuracy score was 93.8%; the mean comprehension score was 9.6. The validity of these scores is supported by the students' performance on the Qualitative Reading Inventory II (Leslie & Caldwell, 1995). On the third-grade-level reading passage, five of the students performed at the instructional level in both word reading accuracy and comprehension.

We also wondered how children perceived the pull-aside program; at the start, classroom teachers had expressed concern that children would feel singled out and "stigmatized" by inclusion in the program. Happily, this was not the case. Teachers reported that the students looked forward to going to the intervention groups and that they had not heard any negative comments about being pulled out of the classroom. In fact, as it turned out, some seemed to perceive participation as a

special privilege. In one instance, two girls burst into tears when their teacher quietly explained to them that the groups were being redesigned and there was a chance that they would remain in the classroom for reading instruction. In another case, a parent encountered in the lobby of the school at dismissal time explained that her daughter, the twin sister of a boy in one of the intervention groups, had lamented at a recent family dinner, “My teacher says I’m a good reader, and I got 100% on my last two reading tests, and I *still* can’t get into Mrs. McCormack’s reading group!”

Unintended Results: Emergence of Another Research Setting

We were pleased with the results, and we were eager to share them with our colleagues and our students. After doing so during one class session, one of our graduate students, a Title I teacher in a local school, decided to implement the intervention model with her own students and to gather evidence of the outcomes. In this section, we tell about her experience.

Kristina’s Intervention

Kristina Dahlene, one of the authors of this chapter, is a Title I teacher in a large urban setting. Centrally located in this setting is the Parker School, comprising 504 students in prekindergarten to sixth grade. Most of the students in this school system are economically poor, with 78% eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Forty-five percent are children of color, primarily African American or Latino, and 25% speak English as a second language. On state testing, this school district scored within the cluster of five lowest performing districts in the state, despite the school’s and district’s commitment to high literacy achievement for all students.

Kristina worked closely with two third-grade teachers. In both classrooms, she was responsible for the students on individual educational plans (IEPs), but she also taught others (i.e., non-IEP students) in the classroom who were low-performing readers. Typically, the instruction she provided to the struggling readers was substantially different from that given to their more able peers. She used reading materials of a lower reading level than those used by the classroom teacher, and most

of her instructional time was focused on decontextualized word-study activities. The children she worked with were either pulled to a table in the back of the classroom or to an office space outside the classroom.

Kristina convinced one of the third-grade classroom teachers with whom she worked, Mrs. Caron, to allow her to try an intervention similar to the one described in this chapter. She planned to use the district-adopted published anthology as the core text, the same text that the classroom teacher used with all the students. As a team, Kristina and Mrs. Caron planned their lessons so that all the students would be receiving instruction in reading using the same text and the same pacing. They also agreed to keep detailed lesson plans to help each other stay on track and to administer periodic running records and end-of-year performance assessments on all students to document progress.

Reading instruction followed a predictable format each day. Using Paratore's (1991, 2000) flexible grouping model, all students gathered for prereading activities. Then, Kristina pulled aside the lowest performing readers to spend more time in systematic phonics instruction, to guide students through repeated readings of the selection after her initial read-aloud, and to engage the students in discussion. Mrs. Caron, meanwhile, worked with the more able readers. They read and reread the text alone and with partners, and then they completed an assigned comprehension task with partners. The students then met with Mrs. Caron to discuss the selection and their cooperative learning activities and to participate in direct instruction of a focal decoding or comprehension strategy. Then, both groups reconvened for shared writing, group discussions of the selection, or individual responses in response journals. In addition, each day Kristina and Mrs. Caron provided ample opportunities for all students, including the lowest performing students, to read other selections at their independent levels to practice the strategies taught in their groups.

The Outcomes

Before Kristina and Mrs. Caron began their work together, they administered the performance assessment to every child in the class. The 9 lowest performing students (out of a total of 24) achieved a mean word-reading accuracy score of 81% and a mean comprehension score of 3. In May, after a year of instruction in the intervention group, those same students achieved a mean word-reading accuracy score of 94% and a

mean comprehension score of 8. In both administrations of the test, the level of text difficulty was grade-appropriate.

In addition to student outcomes, this implementation also yielded teacher outcomes. Kristina commented that planning for this group of students was more rewarding and meaningful than for the other groups with whom she worked. Her observations of the children's actions and interactions in the classroom convinced her that they had a greater sense of belonging and connectedness to their peers. She attributed this to the fact that they were reading the same literature and engaging in the same literature-related activities.

She also believed that the repeated readings of selections of the text were effective in helping the students to build fluency and gain confidence in their reading. The periodic performance assessments confirmed her belief. The students with whom she worked made steady progress in word-reading accuracy and comprehension on grade-level text. Moreover, she understood that the frequent opportunities that the students had to read easier text gave them the practice and responsibility to decode unknown words and gain fluency.

Mrs. Caron, a seasoned teacher, was equally pleased with the effectiveness of the intervention. She noted that struggling readers became more fluent, more engaged during sustained silent reading, and generally more confident about reading. With one year of the intervention behind her, she made rigorous plans to continue the intervention the next year with Kristina.

What Have We Learned?

We began our work with a single question in mind: When children enter third grade reading substantially below grade level, what are the effects of grouping children homogeneously for part of their literacy instruction and providing instruction using grade-level text in combination with explicit, systematic, and intensive instruction in both word and comprehension strategies? At the start, our work was motivated primarily by three factors, mentioned earlier and recapped here. First, despite early intervention and effective classroom teaching in first and second grades, many children continue to struggle in reading. Second, failing to learn to read in the early grades has long-term cognitive and intellectual consequences for children, leading many of them to school failure. Third, in the increasingly politically charged educational climate,

the consequences for reading failure are compounded by threats of retention, denial of high school graduation, and reduced funding to schools and communities.

During the months of implementation, we became aware of a new and growing practice—one that further increased our interest in the outcomes of the work that we had underway. As we talked with teachers and visited classrooms in our regions, we found that teachers were increasingly returning to the grouping practices of the past. That is, under the guise of a practice called “guided reading,” teachers were grouping children by ability and were meeting with five and six different groups each day, groups formed on the basis of the books children could read with relative ease. With few exceptions, these groups represented most, at times all, of what children read.

As we considered this practice, we understood the teachers’ motivation. We, too, were concerned with the evidence that the shift away from ability grouping that took place during the 1980s and 1990s led many teachers to abandon grouping altogether and instruct children in whole-class settings. We, too, were concerned with the evidence that for many children, the reading lesson had become, in fact, a listening lesson—a time when complex text was read aloud to them and when they were invited to discuss and write, but rarely to read. This practice, of course, might be effective in building language and comprehension, but unless a teacher was going to follow a child into adulthood, without independence in reading, eventually the learning would stop. So, although we understood teachers’ motivation and shared their concerns, we had an additional concern—that children *cannot learn what they are not taught*. That is, failure to teach children to read high-level vocabulary, concepts, and ideas will likely deny them an equal opportunity to acquire the knowledge they will need to continue to develop their cognitive and intellectual abilities, to succeed in comprehending complex language and ideas, and to become proficient at writing and sharing complex language and ideas. As the pendulum began to swing one more time back toward the practices of the past, our work took on even greater meaning for us.

So, how do we make sense of our evidence? First, the fact that children achieved high levels of performance on text that was judged to be “too difficult” for them reminded us that reading difficulty does not reside in the text alone, but that text difficulty interacts with the linguistic characteristics of the text and the actions of the teacher. Years-old research in schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984),

vocabulary knowledge (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982), text structure (Meyer & Rice, 1984), and motivation theory (Wigfield & Asher, 1984) taught us that using readability formulas without attention to the ways and the contexts in which children are taught often leads us astray in choosing appropriate text for children to read. Our work reaffirmed the need to pay attention to this earlier research. Systematic and routine use of time-honored strategies including preteaching vocabulary, building background knowledge, reading aloud to diminish text difficulty, engaging children in rereadings, and guiding retellings with graphic organizers paid off in making difficult text accessible to children and thereby allowing them to *read*, not just listen to, high-level text.

Second, we were reminded that meeting individual needs does not mean creating different tracks, nor does adhering to a common text mean “one size fits all.” Again, this was not a new finding, but, in an educational climate of extreme pendulum swings, it is one that may need to be reaffirmed. Evidence tells us that tracking often has negative consequences for students, placing them on pathways that lead them to different destinations (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Collins, 1971; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1987; Wilcox, 1982). In reading instruction, the use of ability grouping typically means that some children read easy text, while others read more difficult text. When this constitutes all or even most of what happens routinely in classrooms, children often have very different instructional experiences (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983). As a consequence, children may end up in very different places, in relation to both the levels of reading proficiency they achieve and the types of future opportunities they have (Allington, 1991, 1994; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). On the other hand, teaching to the whole class leads to similarly negative findings, resulting in lower rates of achievement for both higher and lower performing readers (Lou, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers, & d’Apollonia, 1996). But there is a middle ground between tracking by ability and whole-class instruction. In the instructional model that we studied, we recognized children’s learning differences and grouped the children accordingly, so that we could meet their particular needs. But we kept them on the same track as their higher performing peers in two ways. We instructed them using the same curriculum as their grade-level peers, and their classroom teachers made certain that when these children returned to their classrooms each day, they were fully integrated into the classroom literacy curriculum. In

short, we differentiated instruction, but not curriculum. The payoff for our students was improved reading fluency, which advanced them toward independence in reading, and improved reading comprehension, which holds the potential for supporting their continued achievement not only in reading but also in schooling in general.

Third, we were reminded that in school contexts in which teachers take a collegial and cooperative stance, seemingly difficult and complex instructional arrangements can be implemented effectively. In our work, we saw this play out in two very different settings. In each, an instructional specialist won the cooperation of grade-level colleagues, who agreed to adhere to a particular time to teach reading, to consistent instructional pacing, and to particular assessment practices. It is important to note that these were not settings in which teachers were given additional planning time in order to carry out the special program; rather, teachers used the time already available, often catching each other “on the fly” to plan, in order to continue to offer a coordinated and cohesive program for the children for whom they were responsible.

Fourth, we were reminded of the remarkable power of good instruction. What we believe is important in our results is the fact that we did not formulate a new, creative, or special approach to teach struggling readers. Rather, we took instructional practices that have been well documented as effective, combined them into what we believed to be a balanced approach, and implemented them in a systematic and intensive way. We were heartened by the progress of all the children, but we were especially encouraged by the substantial progress of the six children with special learning needs. Although the data are far too limited to allow us to generalize beyond this classroom, the children’s progress and performance raised questions for us about the wisdom of the common practice of offering children with special learning needs instructional programs that are substantially different from those provided to their classroom peers. Once again, this is not a new finding. Allington and McGill-Franzen (1989) for example, questioned the effectiveness of what they termed “different programs” but “indifferent instruction” (p. 75) for children identified as special education learners. Yet, many years later, such practices persist, with seemingly little momentum in achieving large-scale programmatic change.

As we reflect on what we did and what we learned, and as we attempt to sort out the circumstances that allowed these teachers to make a difference in the literate lives of the children they taught, we find a long list of contributing factors. We have distilled the list to three that

we believe were critical in explaining children's success. First, the instructional model itself brought together much of what we have learned about the effective teaching of reading, and, by so doing, it offered children explicit and systematic instruction in both word-study and comprehension strategies and opportunities to practice the strategies they were learning in high-level texts. Second, although the instructional model framed one hour of literacy instruction, it was only part of what teachers and children did. In addition to the one-hour literacy lesson, when children returned to the classroom, they not only joined a context in which their peers shared the same texts and activities but they also had daily opportunities to read and talk about books they selected to read on their own, books as easy or difficult as they chose. In addition, they read across the content areas with and without instruction from the teacher. Third, the children were taught by teachers who were knowledgeable about the teaching of reading, effective classroom managers, and enthusiastic about their roles as teachers—motivated enough to ask the reading specialist, when they observed how well children were doing, “What do you do down there, anyway?!” In short, the children were taught by teachers who liked teaching and who were constantly seeking to become better teachers. We suspect that each of these factors was equal in importance to the success we observed, and that if any one of the factors were to be taken away, the success we observed would likely be taken with it.

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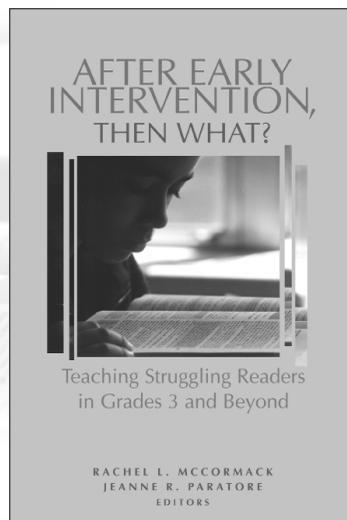
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